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Public Trust in President

EXTENSION OF REMARKS

OF

HON. GEORGE MEADER

OF MICHIGAN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, March 6, 1963

MR. MEADER. Mr. Speaker, under leave to extend my remarks, I include the following editorial from the Jackson (Mich.) Citizen Patriot of February 24, 1963.

MANAGED NEWS ISSUE WEAKENS PUBLIC TRUST IN PRESIDENT

The White House has invited representatives of all news media to a conference in April to discuss the administration's public information policies.

No one expects this to be a love feast. Associations of news men have criticized the administration's so-called managed-news policies and the administration, in turn, is reported displeased with the manner in which the news is treated.

We have a strong feeling of concern because a conference between government and the news media has been called. Or, rather, that anyone should consider such a thing necessary.

Ideally, the press should go about its business of reporting the news without concern for its management other than obvious restrictions due to requirements of national security. Meanwhile, the President should go about the business of running the Government and letting the news chips fall where they may, except, again, where national security is concerned.

The sad truth, however, is that the Kennedy administration, with its apparent policy of managing the news and its urge for favorable publicity for the President and his official—as well as personal—family, has more than its share of trouble with the news media.

As a result, not only reporters and editors, but the public in general, are beginning to lose confidence in what administration spokesmen, and the President, himself, have to say. This is a very bad thing.

Mr. Kennedy is a clever man and an accomplished politician. He understands the importance of a good image as created by public reports on what he and his administration are doing. But he seems to be trying too hard. He apparently is too much concerned with the image.

At his press conferences he tends to answer serious, searching questions with wisecracks rather than giving serious answers or falling back on the presidential prerogative of "no comment." So long as the assembled reporters laugh, he appears satisfied. But we doubt that the reporters—or the people—really are amused.

This hassle over managed news, of course, stems from the Cuban crisis when the administration not only concealed the truth, but let one of its spokesmen admit that it was doing so. That, of course, was Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, who said that "news generated by actions of the Government as to content and timing are part of the arsenal of weaponry that a President has in the application of military force and related forces to the solution of political problems, or to the application of international political pressure."

The American Society of Newspaper Editors, in a report on news management during the Cuban crisis, pointed out that the Defense Department said, on October 19, that

it had no information indicating the presence of offensive weapons in Cuba. Yet Secretary McNamara later said that he had received hard intelligence on this subject October 15.

The question is raised: Have we reached the point where the word of the U.S. Government must be challenged continuously?

The American Society of Newspaper Editors report goes on to point out that Secretary McNamara first said that any ship that ignored the blockade would be shot out of the water.

"What happened?" the report goes on. "Some ships, especially Scandinavian, ignored the blockade. The Defense Department actually ordered only a selective blockade, though the Navy was prepared to maintain a tight one. Interceptions that were made apparently were staged, although the public was led to believe they were real."

The public, which was 100 percent behind the President's stand on Cuba, was being misled as to what actually was being done. It is impossible to see what purpose was served. The damage to public confidence in the administration, however, was considerable.

President Kennedy is reported puzzled by his inability to silence his critics or his handling of the Cuban situation and by seemingly adverse public reaction.

He went to the extent of ordering the Secretary of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency to stage an elaborate presentation on Cuba, revealing photographs of the island.

Still the chorus of dissent continues. It does so largely because the news management policy leaves the word of the Government open to question.

And this, we repeat, is a bad thing. Its effect on the political fortunes of Mr. Kennedy is not important even though it may be pleasing to his political enemies.

The point is that the people and the press should have confidence in what the Government says.

We hope this matter can be straightened out in a conference between White House figures and the representatives of news media. We doubt that it can be, however, because the habit of putting on the best possible political face, regardless of the effect on the people's right to know, seems deeply ingrained in the administration. This is not a pleasant thing to contemplate, but we fear that's the way it is.